

Chelsea is Invited to the Table!

by Alan Swartz

Luke 18:15-17 (NRSV) People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

As a small child, I lived in a valley tucked into central Pennsylvania. In that valley lived most of my family on my father’s side. My grandparents lived in the valley. I had aunts and uncles that lived there. I had first cousins through fifth cousins that lived in that valley. Everywhere you looked there was family. The church that we went to was also like that. It was a white wooden church building, built into the side of a big hill. At the top of the hill was the cemetery where I can go and see the graves of family members who have departed this life.

Anyway, the church was made up of a lot of big families. It was smaller than this church but here, there, and at all churches there is the effort to come together forging relationships as the family of God. To me, the church was just an extension of an already extended family. Everything we did in that family had significance to our being a family.

Now, there was one time of the year that this family aspect became abundantly clear. It was at Thanksgiving time. I know what we were told in school about Thanksgiving being a national holiday and all of the stories associated with the day. But even as a child I seriously considered those stories to be apocryphal in nature. I didn’t believe they really had anything to do with the true holiday of Thanksgiving. Even as a small child I could tell you that Thanksgiving was not a *national holiday*, it was a *Swartz family holiday*, and if other people wanted to celebrate on that day, well, who was I to stop them. I was just glad that they could find enjoyment in our holiday.

I knew that Thanksgiving was a Swartz family holiday because of how seriously we took it as a family. As the cool, late September air would begin to chill the mountains and the leaves would begin the slow, colorful transformation, our thoughts would turn to the holiday that was still well over a month away—Thanksgiving. Oh, the anticipation. It was almost as bad as Christmas. (I say almost as bad, because Christmas lasted for weeks and you collected toys.) But at Thanksgiving there was food—not just ordinary food, but there was cranberry sauce (oh, I loved cranberry sauce), there was ambrosia (a fruity delight that was certainly the nectar of the gods), there was 24 hour salad (another fruity concoction that made your mouth water just thinking about it), and there was pumpkin pie (not just any old pumpkin pie, but my grandmother’s pumpkin pie).

I remember how the preparation would begin days before Thanksgiving. There was the turkey to be bought. There were pies to make. Grandmother always had to make about twice as many pies as were needed to accommodate the nibbling that went on. The pies were stored on an unheated porch where they were kept very cool and many family members found that back porch to be a convenient way to go in and out of the house. At the end of each day there would always seem to be one less pie and one more empty pie plate. Just a couple of days before the feast the women would check the plates and silverware.

Early on the morning of the feast the men would get out the extra leaves for the table. Now this table was round and had about enough room for six people to squeeze around assuming half of them were children. But the men would begin to bring in the leaves. The table was placed between the living room and the den and it would stretch open to the ends of each room. With all of the leaves placed in the table it seemed that you could easily fit 25 people around the table. Now, we didn’t have 25 chairs. Some people would have to sit on benches or footstools or whatever else could be moved to the table and provide a surface to rest on.

Finally, came the time of the feast. Just before the feast would begin, *it would happen*. Some of the women would begin to set up a card table in the kitchen.

You knew what it meant—**banishment**.

Some unlucky children were not going to be able to sit at the big table. They would be stuck in the kitchen eating scraps (well, they weren't scraps—but it seemed that way). You wouldn't be able to hear the jokes that the adults would tell. You wouldn't be able to hear their stories. Most important of all, you miss seeing the large plates of steaming food being passed by with the aromas being wafted in your direction.

It was a terrible fate!

We often make the mistake of referring to our children as the church of tomorrow. I tell you, they aren't. They are part of the church today.

Consider the baptisms of little children. Often they are only little babies. Let's consider the little baby girl I am baptizing this morning. Her name is Chelsea. She is a small thing and she doesn't quite know what to make of the strange man in a black gown who is taking her from the safe and familiar arms of her mother. Some people would say that since she doesn't understand what is going on she shouldn't be baptized. In much the same way, people often argue that children shouldn't take Holy Communion because they don't understand it. Some churches refuse to baptize the mentally retarded for similar reasons.

What does it mean to be a child of God?

When I was at my first church I remember being asked by a woman to come and visit her that week at her home. When I got there she proceeded to scold me for giving communion to children. "They are too small to understand what is going on! It is a disgrace!" I wasn't sure how to respond—all I could do was ask her, "Maybe you should explain to me what you think is going on. Let me see if you really understand what is going on."

We refer to the sacraments as mysteries. We acknowledge that it is God who is at work. In the sacrament to Baptism, it is God who is calling us. It is a sign of his prevenient grace. It is a sign of his constant presence and persuasion. When we baptize a child in the name of the Trinity we are saying "You belong to God—you are God's." God is making a covenant with you and a promise to you—and God keeps his promises. You see,

that is the wonderful and good news about Jesus Christ. This new life is a gift.

I remember seeing a cartoon back in the mid-eighties. It was a cartoon of two Pharisees talking to Jesus. One of them was saying, “We get our salvation the old fashioned way — we earn it.”

No — the Good News of Christ is that we do not earn our salvation. We cannot earn our salvation. Without Christ we are hopelessly lost in a thicket of sin.

There is not one thing I have done in my life that would make me worthy of God’s Love. Nevertheless — I have his love.

When we baptize our children, we baptize them into the church — the family of God. We don’t want them to be second-rate members of the family to be relegated to a card table in the kitchen. No, we want them out here in the main dining room with all of us, hearing the great stories of the faith and sharing at our banquet table in God’s everlasting feast. God bless the little children. For in blessing them, we are all blessed!

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